Educating with Meaning: Learning as an Act of Shared Humanity

Ernesto Mascarell Pérez
Independent Researcher
mascarell1960@hotmail.com

"To educate, in its deepest sense, is to enable each new generation to become aware that life is woven into a dance—emotions intertwining with reasons, intentions becoming actions, learning turning into service, and the certainty that the self is only recognized in the thou, and the thou is only completed in the self. Our task is to awaken that awareness and learn to dance with it."

There is a scene that repeats itself in classrooms around the world. A teacher explains content clearly, students take notes, and weeks later, that knowledge has faded as if it had never existed. It is not that the teacher has explained poorly, nor that the students are negligent. The problem is deeper: we have constructed a model of teaching that treats knowledge as if it were an inert object, a package of information that can be transferred from one mind to another without emotion, intention, or connection to life.

This model, which we might call "impersonal," ignores two fundamental facts about human nature. The first, demonstrated by research in theory of mind, is that our brains are not designed to process isolated data but to interpret intentions. As Henry Wellman has shown, from the earliest childhood we attribute thoughts, desires, and beliefs to others, and this capacity is not a social luxury but the mechanism through which we make sense of the world. A historical fact without an agent to drive it, without a conflict of intentions, without consequences for people's lives, is data that the brain labels as irrelevant and discards. Hence, traditional teaching, by presenting content as if it occurred in a vacuum, condemns learning to superficiality.

The second fact, complementary to the first, is that human beings are naturally predisposed to transmit what we learn. Sidney Strauss and Margalit Ziv have documented that teaching emerges as a "natural cognition" in children as young as two or three years old, and Hyowon Gweon has shown that children decide what to teach based on what they believe will be useful for the other.

That is, we not only interpret the intentions of others but also orient ourselves to help them, to share our knowledge. This drive for transmission and service is not a cultural addition but an expression of our social biology, and education that ignores it wastes the most powerful engine for deep learning.

The connection between these two facts—intentional interpretation and social transmission—is illuminated by affective neuroscience. Antonio Damasio taught us that emotion and reason are not separate processes but are intimately linked in decision-making and learning. Emotions act as markers that guide our attention and help us evaluate the relevance of information. Mary Helen Immordino-Yang has deepened this idea applied to education, demonstrating that without emotional engagement, knowledge does not transfer, does not connect with life. And Francisco Mora synthesizes it with an unforgettable phrase: "we can only learn what we love." But love or curiosity do not arise spontaneously; they arise when content responds to a genuine human need.

This is a crucial point. It is essential to distinguish between the set of human needs—personal, social, and environmental—which are universal, limited, and healthy, and desires, which are unlimited, insatiable, and often harmful. When learning connects with any of these needs—for example, statistics with the security of making informed decisions, or literature with belonging through understanding characters' emotions—then content ceases to be cold data and becomes a tool for life. Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan corroborates this idea: when an environment satisfies the needs for autonomy, competence, and belonging, intrinsic motivation flourishes.

But it is not enough to connect content with a need; it is also necessary to understand it as part of a human narrative. Theory of mind tells us that we understand better what has a protagonist, an intention, a conflict. That is why teaching history by saying "the Industrial Revolution brought machines" is very different from saying "business owners wanted to produce more to earn more, and workers were displaced; both sides made decisions, felt fear or ambition, and those decisions changed the world." The first phrase is a piece of data; the second is a story with intentional characters, and therefore comprehensible and memorable. The same happens with science: photosynthesis is a chemical process, but if we tell it as the "invention" of plants to capture energy and survive, then we put ourselves in the plant's shoes, attribute an intention to survive, and the content comes alive.

This humanization of content is the first step, but the second is equally important: transforming the student into an active transmitter. When a student knows they will teach another, their theory of mind activates powerfully: they must anticipate what the other knows, what will be difficult for them, how to structure their explanation. David Duran has systematized this process under the

concept of "aprenseñar" (learning by teaching), and evidence shows that those who prepare to teach reorganize their knowledge more deeply, identify essentials, and develop a more robust understanding. Moreover, when teaching is oriented toward solving a real problem that affects others—as in service-learning—content acquires radical meaning. William Damon has studied the sense of purpose in young people and shown that when they feel their effort transcends their own benefit, their motivation soars. It is not the same to do a project for the teacher as to design a manual for children at a neighboring school; a real audience, a concrete beneficiary, is an unstoppable catalyst.

This flow—understanding intentions, connecting with needs, transmitting to help—unfolds naturally in what I have called poliphonic dialogue. Taken from Mikhail Bakhtin and developed pedagogically by Alexander Sidorkin, poliphonic dialogue is the art of orchestrating diverse voices without reducing them to a single truth. In contrast to the teacher's monologue that imposes, and in contrast to dialectics that pits two positions against each other so that one wins, poliphonic dialogue welcomes the plurality of perspectives, makes them resonate with each other, and from that resonance emerges a richer understanding. In the classroom, this means that the educator is not the only one who speaks nor the one who has the last word; their task is to ask, listen, validate, and help students become aware of their own intentions and contrast them with those of others. For this dialogue to be possible, empathy is required—that capacity that Frans de Waal has documented in the animal kingdom and that mirror neurons, discovered by Rizzolatti, allow us to simulate in our brains. A climate of trust, where voices are heard without judgment, is the fertile ground where meaningful learning can germinate.

But meaningful learning is not a linear process; it is recursive. Recursivity—a system's capacity to fold back upon itself—is a pattern we find in biology (Margulis's endosymbiosis), in animal cognition (Köhler's insight), and in human development (the internalization of social dialogue described by Vygotsky). Gregory Bateson formalized this idea by distinguishing between learning something, learning to learn, and learning to question the premises of one's own learning. In education, recursivity means that knowledge is not accumulated but reorganized, brought into relation with other experiences, applied to new contexts, and this folding process generates deep understandings. I have proposed the Integral Zone of Proximal Development (IZPD) as a framework for understanding this dynamic: learning occurs in four dimensions—knowing, being able, wanting, and believing—which feed back into each other. A change in believing (an increase in self-efficacy) enhances wanting (motivation), which leads to more practice, which improves being able and knowing, and this loop can be evolutionary. But it can also be involutive: a bad experience damages believing, reduces wanting, decreases practice, and

stagnates knowing. Recursive pedagogy consists of designing experiences that activate evolutionary loops and offering scaffolding when the system stagnates.

This is where the design of first experiences in a new domain becomes especially important. I have studied that first contact with a subject, a sport, or a skill is not a formality but a foundational moment. If that first contact is positive—if the learner experiences adapted success, in a safe environment, with a positive emotional closure—an evolutionary loop is activated: they believe they can, they want to continue, they practice, and they improve. If it is negative—if there is public failure or ridicule—the loop becomes involutive, and repairing it later requires much more effort. Therefore, designing first experiences with guaranteed success, scaffolding in all four dimensions, and protection against negative public exposure is not a luxury but an ethical and pedagogical necessity.

If we integrate all these elements—theory of mind, emotion, human needs, social transmission, poliphonic dialogue, recursivity—we obtain a coherent image of what it means to educate with meaning. It is not about applying a recipe, but about adopting an attitude: seeing each student as an intentional agent, with a history, emotions, beliefs, and a desire to be useful. The educator thus becomes a mediator who helps the student articulate their intentions, connect content with their needs, put themselves in others' shoes, and find a purpose that transcends mere grades. The classroom becomes a space where voices are orchestrated, loops are activated, and error is a source of information, not shame.

This vision is not utopian. There are already experiences that embody it: peer tutoring, service-learning, dialogue circles, interdisciplinary projects with social impact. But for it to become widespread, we need a paradigm shift that affects teacher training, curriculum design, assessment systems, and above all, the very conception of what it means to educate. Educating is not depositing information; it is enabling each person to deploy their capacity to understand the world, connect with others, and contribute to the common good. It is, ultimately, orchestrating the recursive loop that is already in human nature, so that it unfolds in all its power.

Intelligence is not a gift that some possess and others do not; it is a potential for complexity that develops when conditions are right. And those conditions are, in essence, relational, emotional, and purposeful. When education assumes this, it will cease to be an obstacle course and become a shared journey toward meaning.

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